

The Valle-Medici Reliefs and the Visualization of Rome

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[Slide 1] Some of the best-known architectural depictions in Roman art are the three temples found on a series of reliefs known collectively as the Ara Pietatis Reliefs or, more recently, the Valle-Medici Reliefs. Their fame is due in large part to the fact that these depictions are believed to be identifiable representations of historical buildings. This has made them appealing not only to scholars of sculpture, but also to those interested in the topography and reconstruction of historical temples.

Despite their renown, analysis of the Valle-Medici architectural depictions has rarely moved beyond the historic buildings they illustrate, with scholarship focused almost exclusively on which buildings are represented and why those buildings in particular were chosen. Most scholars have thought that the depictions and their high level of detail are explained sufficiently by a need to establish topographic specificity for the illustrated sacrifices. [2] Mario Torelli, for example, writes that “the action is perfectly localized by the introduction of topographic symbols, represented by the temple structures, sculpted with great care so that they may easily be recognized.” Such topographic precision in turn is usually explained by some need to represent specific historic events accurately, or concerns for emphasizing dynastic connections.

Pursuing the representations' connection to historical temples, and going no farther, misses critical aspects of these representations' potential impact. As will be seen, many important features of the depictions cannot be explained by a need to provide topographic information. An analysis of the Valle-Medici Reliefs can demonstrate how the significance of depicted architecture can extend beyond identification, even for monuments where that identification is clear and emphasized.

[3] From a methodological stand point, revealing this significance for architectural depictions requires three components: (a) attention to all architectural details, rather than focusing exclusively on those related to a depiction's identification; (b) treating those details as representing conscious choices, rather than inevitable byproducts of "faithfully" illustrating a historical building; (c) analyzing each representation and its details within the broader context of the monument as a whole.

[4] The first part of my talk will outline how architecture is represented on the Valle-Medici Reliefs, focusing on what details were chosen for inclusion. The second part will explore the significance of the details and how the temples are represented, specifically how they work together to present a particular vision of Rome. The third part will contextualize the Valle-Medici depictions within the history of monumental reliefs and the socio-political development of Rome.

I now need to pause for a brief note about terminology. [5] In this talk, I will use the phrase "monumental reliefs" to refer to large-scale sculptures, which were set up in publicly accessible space, by groups or individuals acting in the capacity of official positions of authority. Scholars traditionally refer to these sort of sculptures as "historical" or "state" reliefs, but both of these

terms carry serious methodological baggage. “Historical” reliefs derives from the assumption that the reliefs’ purpose was to illustrate historical events. “State reliefs” implies that the monuments were set up by a unified, coherent political body like a “state.” Since in this talk I will be querying both of these assumptions for the Valle-Medici Reliefs, I will use the phrase “monumental reliefs,” a term that focuses on the reliefs’ impressive size and commemorative purpose.

Another issue is exactly how monumental reliefs were commissioned, designed, and executed.

[6] The few extant dedicatory inscriptions we have record that the monuments were set up, at least nominally, by the Senate and People of Rome for the emperor. Recent scholarship has tended to take these inscriptions at their word, interpreting monumental reliefs as a means by which the Senate expressed its loyalty and expectations to the imperial regime. When it comes to assigning authorship to individual sculptural features, however, we are still very much in the dark. In this talk, therefore, I will use the term “the production team” to refer collectively to anyone and everyone involved in the production of the reliefs.

[7] The Valle-Medici Reliefs consist of a collection of fragmentary panels that show processions and sacrifices in front of three large temples. [8] Scholars have cited similarities in style, scale, and technique to identify the panels as belonging to the same original monument. [9] This original monument is typically reconstructed as a large altar, based on similarities with the *Ara Pacis Augustae*. As is fairly typical for monumental reliefs, the exact location, date, and identification of this altar are hotly debated, since the reliefs were not found in situ. There is

general consensus, however, that the altar should be dated to the Julio-Claudian period, and that the monument was some sort of dynastic statement involving Augustus.

[10] The largest temple shown on the Valle Medici Reliefs is Corinthian octastyle. It is depicted frontally, with a good portion of the façade taken up by a tall podium. The façade is elongated vertically, particularly in the column shafts. [11] Details such as blocks of ashlar masonry, shown over a plain socle, and the various parts of the column bases are carefully articulated. [12] The entablature is divided into an architrave with three fasciae, a plain frieze, and a row of dentils.

[13] The central pedimental figure (traditionally identified as Mars) [14] is a standing, half-nude male holding a staff and scepter, and flanked by parallel sets of figures positioned to fill the triangular space of the pediment. [15] These figures and the temple's octastyle form have led scholars to identify this depiction as the Temple of Mars Ultor in the Forum of Augustus.

[16] The second largest depicted temple is Corinthian hexastyle, shown in three-quarters view with an emphasis on the front facade. This façade also features elongated proportions, particularly of the column shafts. [17] The podium shows a small altar inserted at the bottom of 15 steps. Behind the elaborate columns, the façade is decorated with a plain socle and the rectangular hatching of ashlar masonry.

The entablature of the hexastyle temple is similar to that of the octastyle temple, with the addition of dentils on all sides of the cornice. [18] A tile roof, with three rows of articulated pan and cover tiles, as well as palmette antefixes, runs along the length of the flank. [19] The pedimental arrangement is unusual: the center is occupied by a mural crown on a throne, flanked by two lounging figures, with crouching beasts in the corners. This iconography has been

connected to the cult of Magna Mater, and the temple identified as her Palatine Temple, specifically as restored by Augustus.

[20] The relief with the third temple, an Ionic tetrastyle structure, is less well preserved. It also featured an elongated façade and a stepped podium. [21] The Ionic capitals are extremely compressed but still carefully articulated. In this case the façade does not have rectangular hatching or socle. [22] A tile roof with delineated pan and cover tiles extends to the right of the façade.

[23] The pedimental sculpture represents a battle scene, where the figures' positions are adapted to fill the triangular space. This dynamic pedimental arrangement is puzzling, given that Roman temples are assumed to have featured primarily vertical figures like those seen on the octastyle temple. Indeed some scholars have suggested that that the tetrastyle temple shows a pedimental group re-located from a Greek temple to a historical Roman temple. Identifications of this temple have varied widely, and have included the Temple of Fides on the Capitoline, the Temple of Victory on the Palatine, and the Temple of the Penates on the Velia.

[24] As I have already mentioned, scholarship on the depicted temples of the Valle-Medici Reliefs has tended to focus narrowly on the identification of the depictions with historical buildings in Rome. The association of these depictions with specific, historical temples was obviously a crucial factor behind why the depictions were included in their original monument. But such associations do not explain everything.

Specifically, theories reliant entirely on historical identifications do not fully explain why such care was taken in many details of the depicted temples. One may argue, of course, that all of

these details simply record features of the actual temples the depictions represent. As we are coming to realize, however, Roman artists rarely seem to have been overwhelmed by a spirit of documentary accuracy and precision in their depictions of buildings. [25] To give but one obvious example, the Capitoline Temple of Jupiter Optimus Maximus in Rome, perhaps the most prominent building in the Roman Empire, varies in its depictions depending on circumstance, [26] even for basic details like the number of façade columns.

One must keep in mind, furthermore, that the majority of viewers of the Valle-Medici Reliefs, in contrast to the archaeologists who study them, would know what the depicted buildings looked like. [27] The detail of the architrave with three fasciae, while fascinating to scholars seeking to reconstruct the Temple of Mars Ultor, probably offered little specific information to the ancient viewer. The ashlar masonry and tile roofs would have been features of most temples erected in Rome from at least Augustus onward. In other words, although the details of the Valle-Medici depictions may have reflected the appearance of actual temples, these features could have done little to clarify the identity of the depicted structures and need to be explained.

A more productive approach is to ask why the production team chose to include the details that they did. [28] Why bother to carefully depict a podium, crowned by a socle, crowned by drafted ashlar construction? How could such details contribute to the overall message of the original monument? To answer these questions we must examine how these details work both separately and together.

In the first place, the three main temples are all depicted in a way that reflects traditionally Roman versions of that particular building type. Podium temples with frontal stairs have long been recognized as a distinctively Etruscan-Roman architectural form. [29] The tall façades and

high podia of the depictions evoke the emphasis on façade and height stressed in actual monumental temples in the capital. In particular, the elongation of the depicted columns recalls the soaring effect of the 50 foot shafts on *aedes* such as the Temple of Mars Ultor. The depictions, in other words, capture something of what must have been the effect of standing at the base of a monumental temple in Rome. The way the façades are depicted thus accentuates that the sacrifices illustrated on the reliefs take place within a specific religious landscape, that of Rome.

[30] Moving in closer, great care has been taken to show the luxurious, elaborate decoration of the temples. While many of these details could add little to the identity of the individual depictions, their cumulative effect had the potential for great thematic impact. Taken together, all of these details recall the extravagant architectural luxury that was coming to characterize Rome in the Julio-Claudian period. In the early first century CE, the imperial temple was a relatively new phenomenon and still something worth celebrating. [31] As the famous passage in Suetonius attests, this architectural luxury was also particularly associated with Augustus. The elaboration of the depicted temples in the Valle-Medici Reliefs therefore might be a Julio-Claudian dynastic statement in and of itself.

Going further, one should note the interplay between sameness and variety in the three depictions. [32] On the one hand, repetition of details ties the depictions together. All three temples are depicted in a similar enough fashion to create the impression of a densely populated yet unified religious landscape. [33] The message is that Rome has not only one major temple, like Ephesus or Didyma, but an entire landscape of beautiful temples working together.

On the other hand, a surprising amount of variety has been achieved, given the relatively narrow parameters of Roman temple architecture. [34] Each temple features a different number of columns. [35] Two different column orders are included, despite the marked Roman preference for Corinthian in contemporary architectural practice. [36] The patterns of molding, while broadly similar, nevertheless are not blandly identical. This sort of visual variation is in keeping with the reliefs' function as part of a decorative frieze, which as Ridgway has described, require variation within their inherent repetition in order to hold the viewer's interest.

[37] The fact that three different temple sizes are represented seems unlikely to be coincidental. As we have seen, there is a general lack of concern in Roman art for accuracy in column number. Thus on the Valle-Medici Reliefs column number could have been manipulated easily for the sake of variety, without doing injury to the identity of the depiction. The same can be said for column order, which also was not applied stringently in architectural depictions. [38] The particular collection of column order in the Valle-Medici Reliefs (two Corinthian temples and one Ionic) is notably the same found in another later collection of temples on the Anaglypha Reliefs, and may be related to establishing a visual rhythm among similar temples.

[39] Even without knowing which temples to which gods are represented, furthermore, the three different sets of pedimental sculpture are immediately distinguishable in terms of style. The sculpture of the octastyle temple is rigid, upright, without any action, featuring gods (Mars, Venus, Fortuna) specifically associated with Roman mythology and ideology. The sculpture of the hexastyle temple also has no action, but is made up of exotic symbols and wild eastern beasts. The sculpture of the tetrastyle temple presents a Hellenistic-style battle scene full of figures with twisting poses. Significantly, the three different cultural spheres evoked by these

different pediments—Roman, eastern, and Greek—correspond with three of the main geographic spheres of the empire at the time.

[40] All of the patterns I have demonstrated so far could be augmented—or undermined—if the original Valle-Medici altar included additional architectural depictions. [41] In 1994 Eugenio La Rocca proposed that seven other fragments, discovered in excavations at the foot of the Capitoline Hill, may belong to the same monument as the Valle-Medici Reliefs, based on striking similarities in style and execution. This proposal has found wide acceptance in scholarship. However, I was able to locate three of the fragments in storage in the Musei Capitolini this August, and having examined them in person, I am now skeptical that they could have all come from the same monument.

The first problem is that the Capitoline fragments are on a much smaller scale than the Valle Medici depictions. [42] A generous estimate of the original height of the depicted structure on fragment MC 3345 reaches barely half the height of the octastyle temple. It is hard to imagine how both temples could have been integrated into the same composition. [43] MC 3346, furthermore, shows the roof of a round structure, but not the same structure as MC 3345: [44] enough of the fragments' background planes are preserved to show that the roof did not meet the background at the same angle as the lower colonnade. We thus have the remains of two different elaborate depictions of round structures. Given the paucity of well-known round structures in Rome, it is unlikely that both can be integrated into the same monument as the Valle-Medici Reliefs.

[45] Rather than attempting to reconstruct a single monument, I think it is safer to interpret the Capitoline fragments as further evidence for the importance of architectural depictions to Roman

monumental reliefs. We can identify at least five separate structures represented by the fragments published by La Rocca, and at least the three fragments I saw are of impressive quality. All of this speaks to the prevalence and prominence of architectural depictions in relief, as well as the potential for previously unidentified monuments lurking somewhere.

[46] The original monument of the Valle-Medici Reliefs was replete with depictions of elaborate, luxurious architecture, carefully presented in a way to maximize visual variation. The question then arises if this was an afterthought, or a driving factor in the selection of which buildings to include. If the historical buildings represented all have a connection to Augustus, then that certainly must have been a major factor in their selection. But Augustus built and restored dozens of buildings. It seems reasonable to suggest that how particular buildings could be represented visually could have been a factor in deciding which building projects made it onto the Valle-Medici monument.

As we have seen, the three historical temples chosen for illustration on the Valle-Medici altar could be represented in a manner that played up the cultural and religious variety those temples brought to the capital city. All of these buildings thus situated the action of sacrifice within a very particular landscape: a Rome that was religiously abundant and diverse, architecturally luxurious, and a creation of Augustus. The production team of the Valle-Medici monument was taking the architectural program of Augustus and adapting it to a new, purely visual medium, a sort of illustrated *Res Gestae*.

Would this message be worth prioritizing when selecting temples? It did have several distinct advantages. The first is that although complex, this message could be conveyed succinctly and with relative ease in visual form. The second is that this message could be grasped by a viewer

with a basic familiarity of broad artistic styles and the religious architecture of Rome, rather than requiring that viewer to know specific details such as the foundation dates of various temples.

The viewer would also not be required to read, either in terms of ability or time.

Going further, the Temple of Mars Ultor could be built only once, and refurbished only so many times. Opportunities to build new structures adjacent to that temple were limited by the availability of space and funds. Ceremonies held in front of that temple were ephemeral and subject to the exigencies of religious practice. But an illustration of that same Temple of Mars Ultor could be installed on another structure across the city, creating permanent, obvious connections between the two structures and the elites they represented.

The reliefs also presented the opportunity to visually rearrange buildings and draw connections between them that might not be as easily recognized within the architectural chaos of Rome herself. The Temple of Mars Ultor and the Temple of Magna Mater as structures could never be viewed together. On the reliefs, in contrast, buildings could be combined at will into meaningful tableaux. No actual temple, furthermore, could ever be viewed completely free of surrounding distractions of nearby buildings, crowds, temporary structures, dirt, noise, weather, and so on. The temples that appear on the Valle-Medici Reliefs are idealized and somewhat abstracted, semantic representations that are perennially uncluttered and unchanging.

This package, a dynastic message with a neat visual delivery system, was probably not a random byproduct of selecting temples by other criteria. Instead it may have been the driving force behind which temples were chosen for inclusion on the monument in the first place. Faced with a plethora of Augustan building projects, the production team may have actively selected temples that could be combined easily into a coherent politicized visual program. Whether or not those

particular temples were ever the scenes of actual sacrifices on the same day or occasion was probably immaterial. Just as the procession scenes of the Ara Pacis could represent an idealized, rather than historical, combination of individuals, so too the series of sacrifices on the Valle-Medici altar could represent idealized piety, rather than a documentary of actual events.

[47] The Valle-Medici Reliefs are our earliest extant major monument from Rome to make extensive use of architectural depictions. This emergence of architectural depictions in monumental reliefs took place in a very specific historical and topographic context. Examining this context can add further support to the idea that the buildings were not just background filler, but an integral part of the monument's themes.

[48] By the time of the Valle-Medici Reliefs, the practice of depicting historical temples was well established in Rome, but in a different medium: coins. Nathan Elkins has pointed out that architectural types first emerged and flourished in the late Republic, in the context of increasing political and social competition among elite families in the capital. He notes that architectural types generally were part of a more elaborate visual numismatic program honoring a moneyer's ancestor. For example, a coin series struck in 58 B.C.E. by Marcus Aemilius Lepidus showed achievements of his illustrious ancestor and featured a building, an equestrian statue, and a diplomatic guardianship.

The Valle-Medici Reliefs seem to take a similar approach to architectural depictions, employing them within the burgeoning medium of monumental reliefs. The Valle-Medici Reliefs thus wed an Augustan tradition of monumental reliefs with a numismatic tradition of dynastic eulogizing through ancestral architecture.

[49] It is perhaps not coincidence that such depictions of elaborate, dynastically charged buildings appear at nearly the same time that the senate was losing the prerogative of constructing such buildings. After centuries of competing through increasingly opulent public works projects, senatorial families suddenly found such activity primarily monopolized by the imperial family. At the same time, other social classes, namely the army and the increasingly wealthy equestrians, were gaining power. Finally, Rome continued to grow as an architectural and urban capital under the auspices of the imperial family, a new force needing appeasement. Depictions of historic structures provided a means by which the senatorial elite could continue to engage with the dialogue of architectural competition, if only indirectly. By illustrating specific buildings built by the imperial family, a technique once used to praise Senatorial families was adapted to praise the imperial family. More broadly, by presenting Rome as a collection of prestigious buildings, the Senate was drawing a distinction between the elite classes that built buildings and those that were just rich. Early monumental reliefs furthered the impression that the very concept of Rome was connected to a good, architecture, that traditionally only the Senate or emperor could provide.

This approach was truly unique. One thing that seems abundantly clear is that no obvious precedent for this use of depicted architecture can be found in Classical or Hellenistic architectural reliefs. This parallels the numismatic record, where depictions of specific architectural structures on coins appear to be a Roman invention. The depicted buildings reflect not only a change in artistic conventions, but a change in attitudes toward architecture.

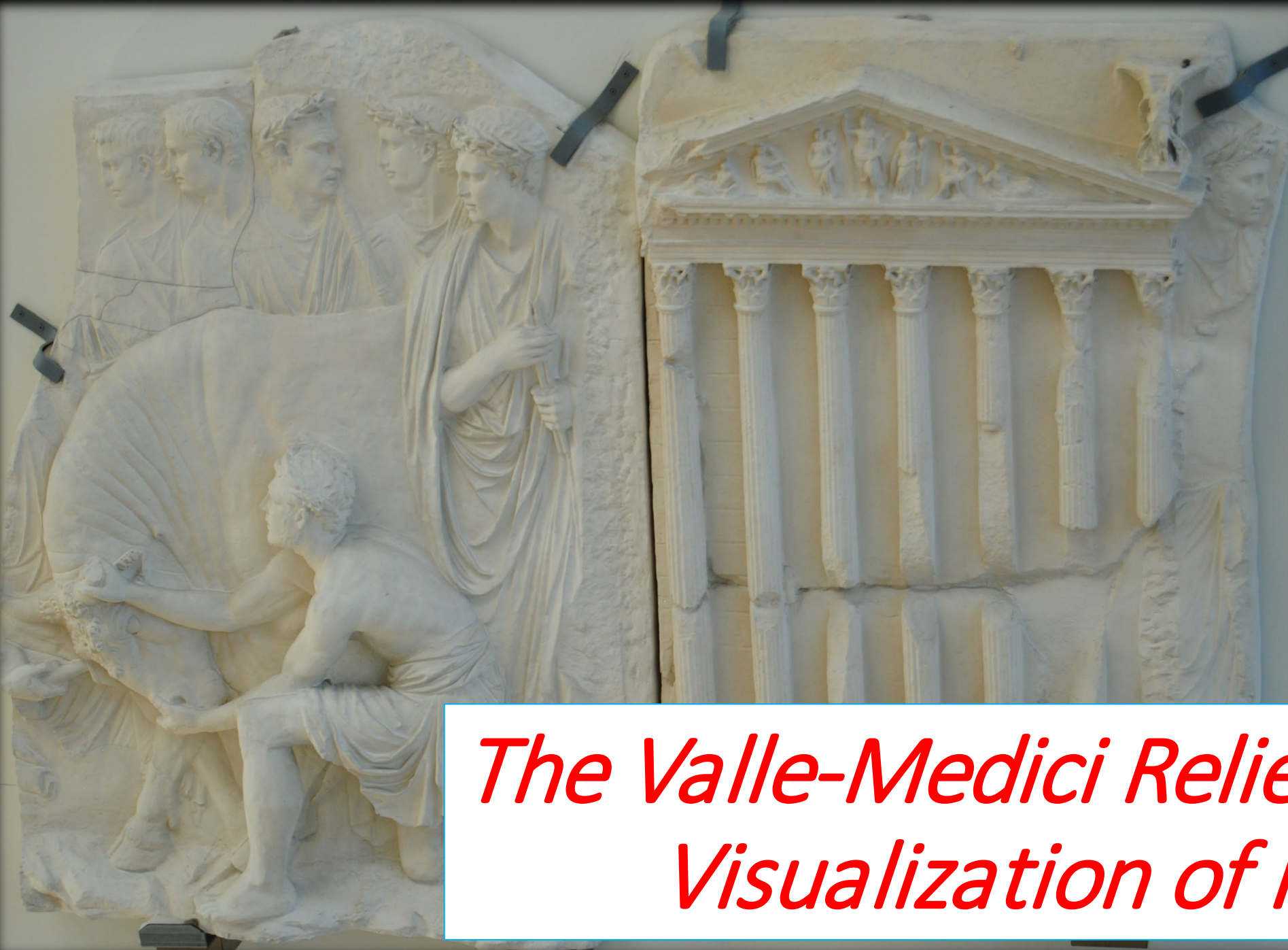
To conclude. I hope I have shown that the Valle-Medici Reliefs are of great interest to modern scholars beyond what they can tell us about the pedimental sculpture of the Temple of Mars Ultor. Specifically they can tell us a great deal about a burgeoning new approach to the

conceptualization and politicized use of architecture within the capital. What we have is a medium that at least later would be associated with the senate, employing a specific type of politicized semiotics once associated with the senate, at the same time that the senate was being locked out of participating in the political process they were illustrating. The Valle-Medici Reliefs thus represent a new approach to celebrating and creating social, political, and cultural capital out of architecture and art. [50]

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*The Valle-Medici Reliefs and the
Visualization of Rome*

- “...the action is perfectly localized by the introduction of topographic symbols, represented by the temple structures, sculpted with great care so that they may easily be recognized” (p. 72)

- M. Torelli. 1982. *Typology and Structure of Roman Historical Reliefs*. Jerome Lectures 14. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press.

Methodology

1. Attention to all architectural details, not just those related to identification
2. Details as conscious choices, not just “faithful” representation
3. Contextualization

My Talk Today

1. Representation of Architecture
2. Significance of Architecture
3. Contextualization

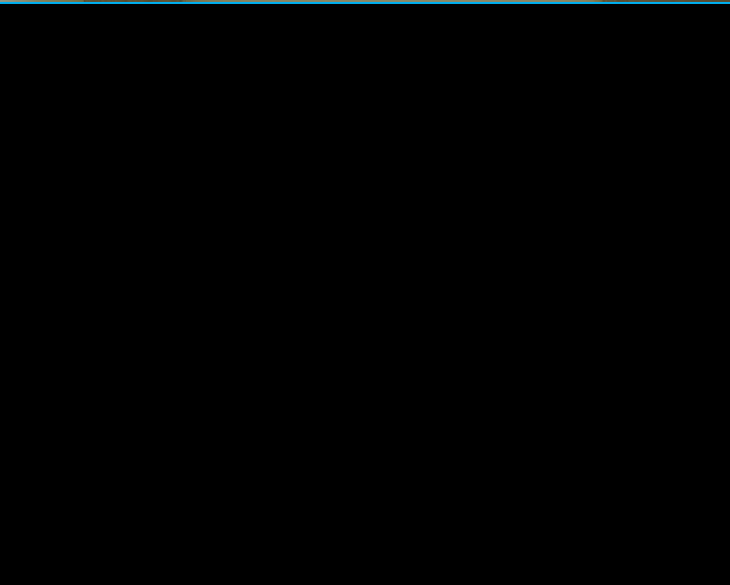
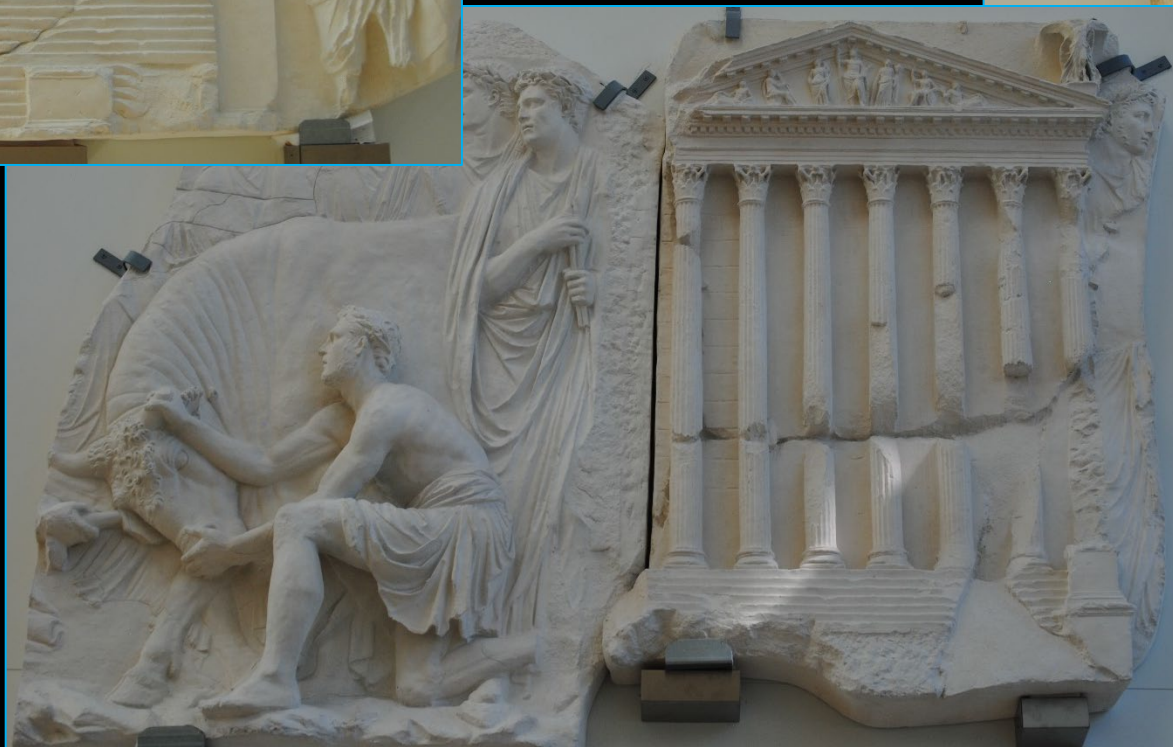
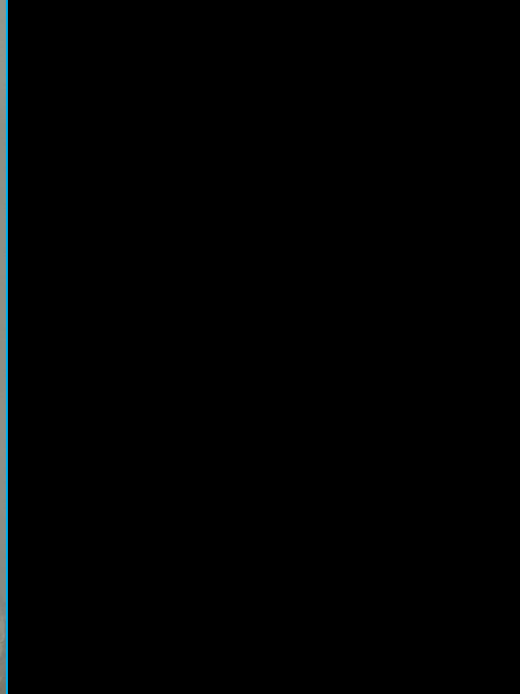
Monumental Reliefs

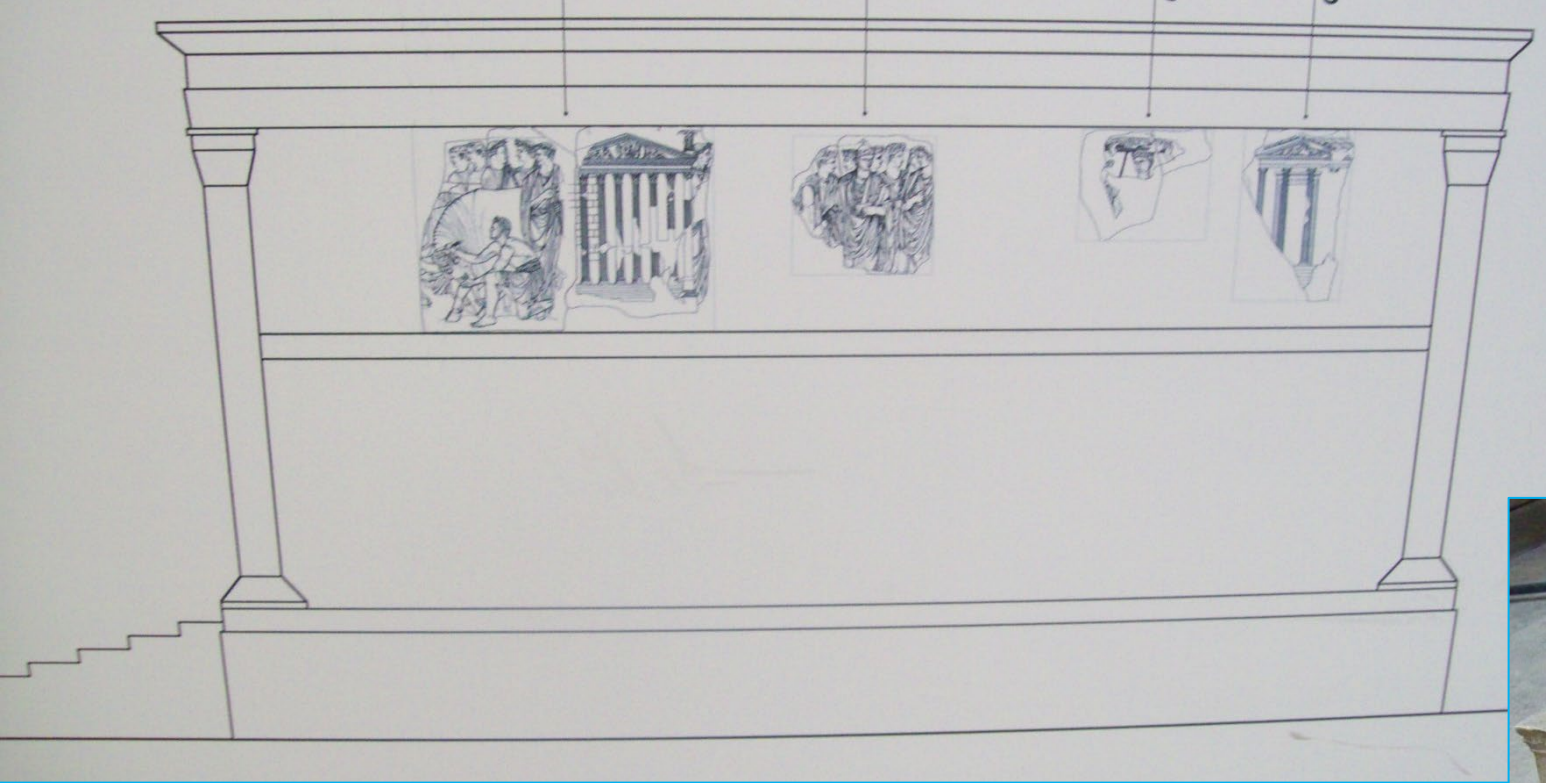
- Large-scale sculptures in relief, set up in publically accessible space, by groups or individuals acting in the capacity of official positions of authority.
- Otherwise known as “historical” or “state” reliefs

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POPVLVSQVE ROMANVS
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The Temples of the Valle-Medici
Reliefs: Representation





Reconstruction of Ara Pacis
(Museo dell'Ara Pacis)



Reconstruction of Valle-Medici altar
(P. Rehak, Museo dell'Ara Pacis)

Octastyle Temple



Octastyle Temple



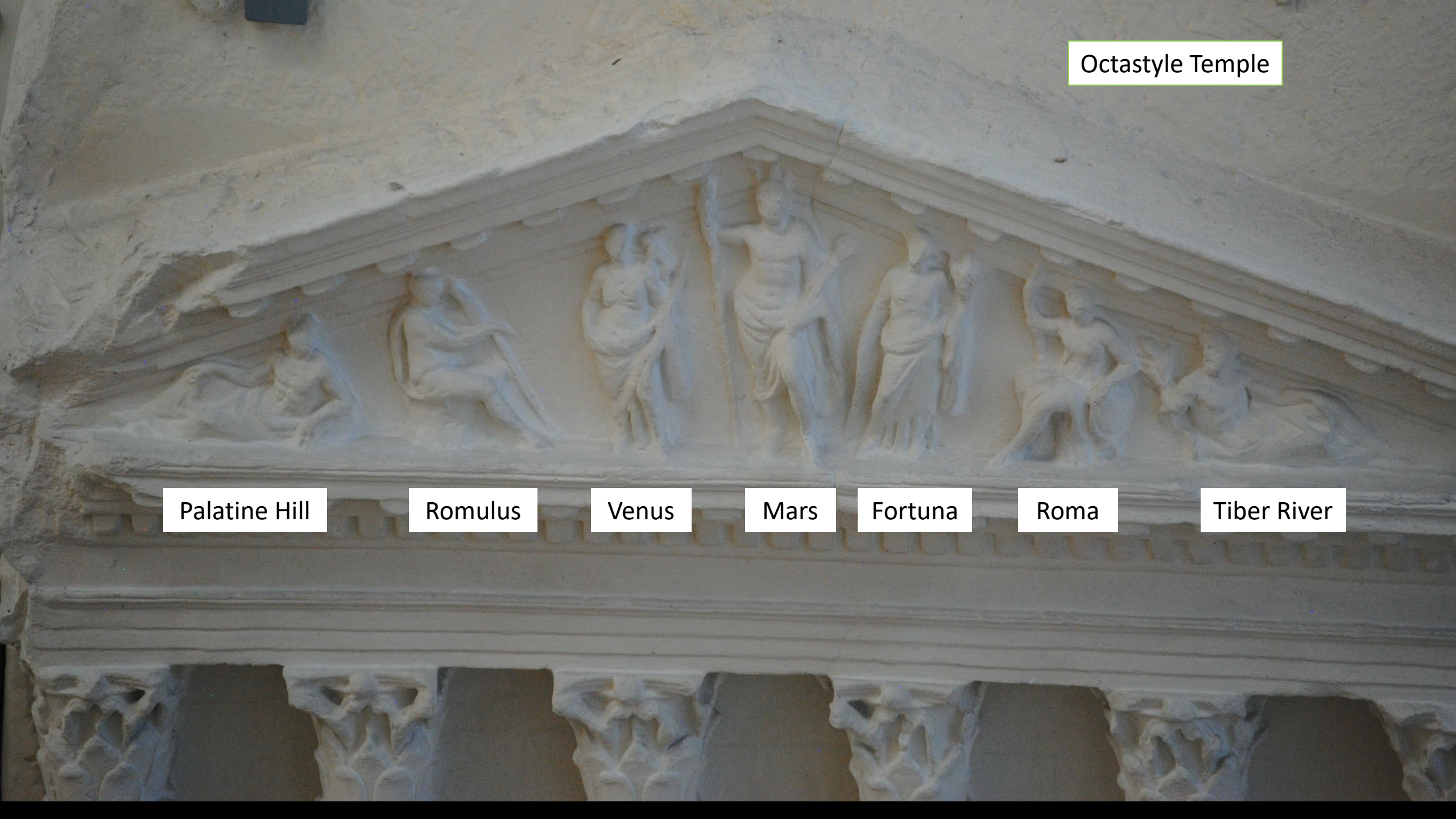


Octastyle Temple

Octastyle Temple



Octastyle Temple



Palatine Hill

Romulus

Venus

Mars

Fortuna

Roma

Tiber River

Octastyle Temple



Hexastyle Temple





Hexastyle Temple

Hexastyle Temple



Hexastyle Temple



Tetrastyle Temple



Tetrastyle Temple



Tetrastyle Temple



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l Corso (1923)

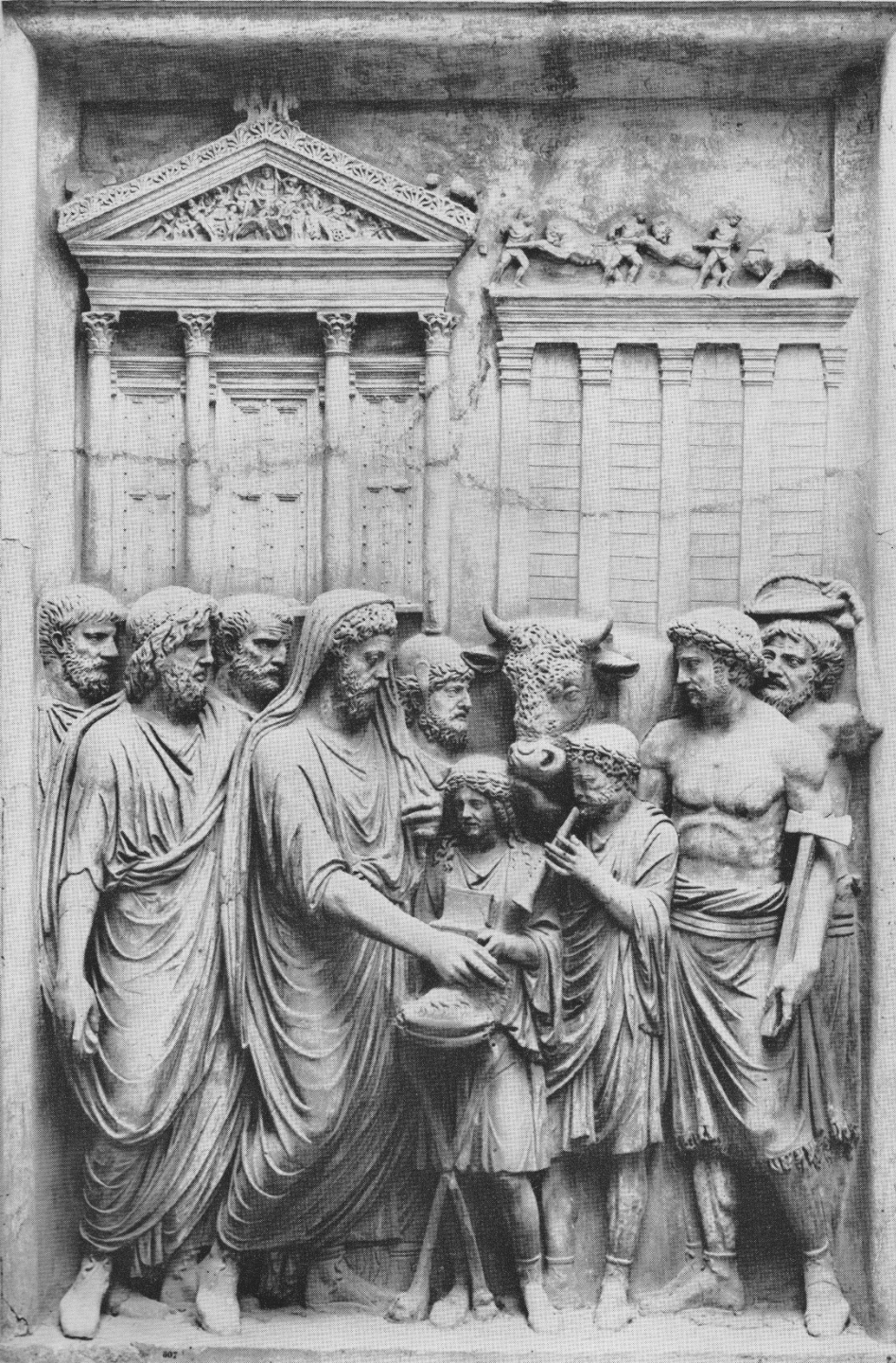
with Ionic temple with

Tetrastyle Temple

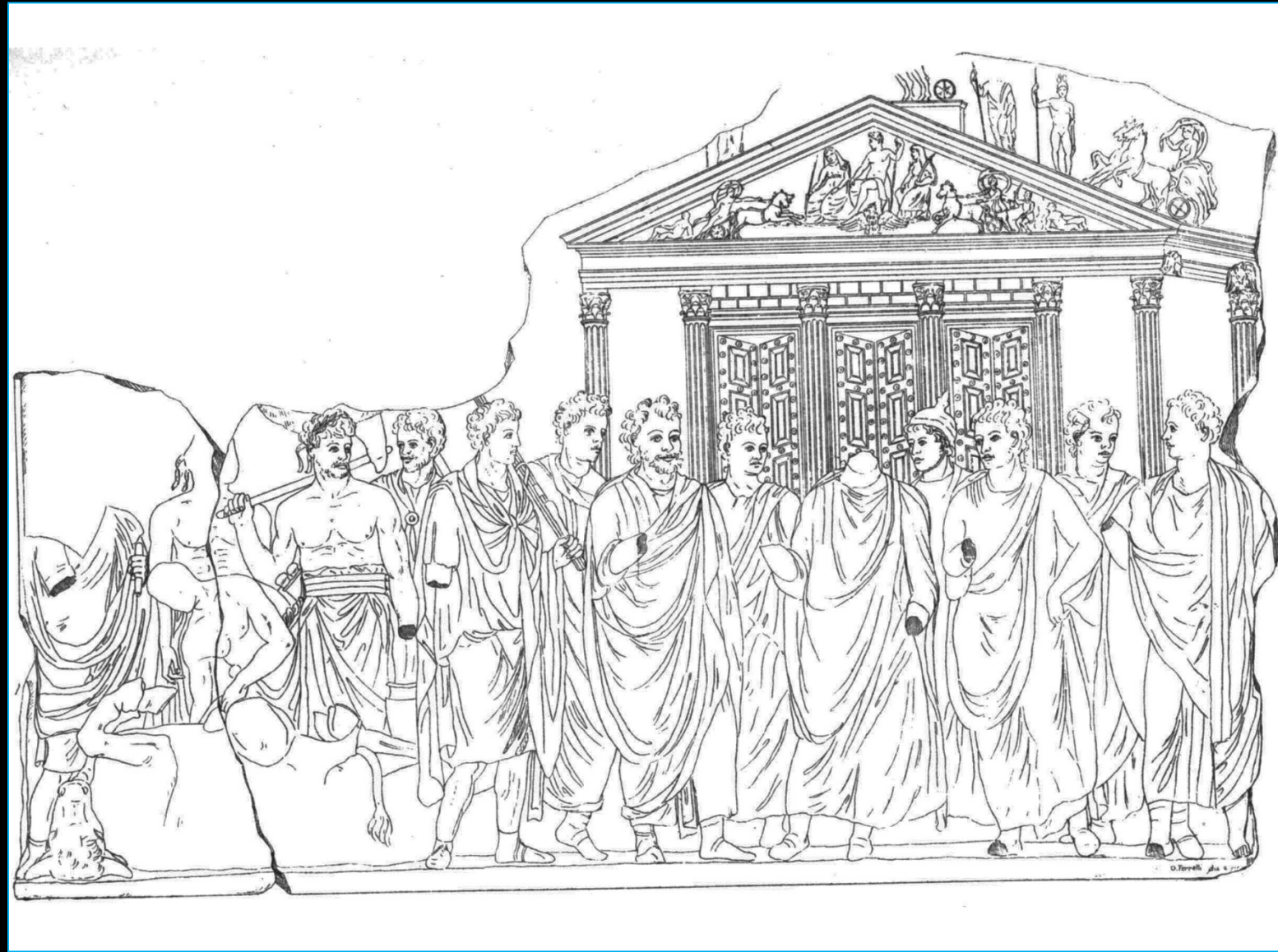


The Temples of the Valle-Medici
Reliefs: Significance

Ancient Depictions of Capitoline Temple

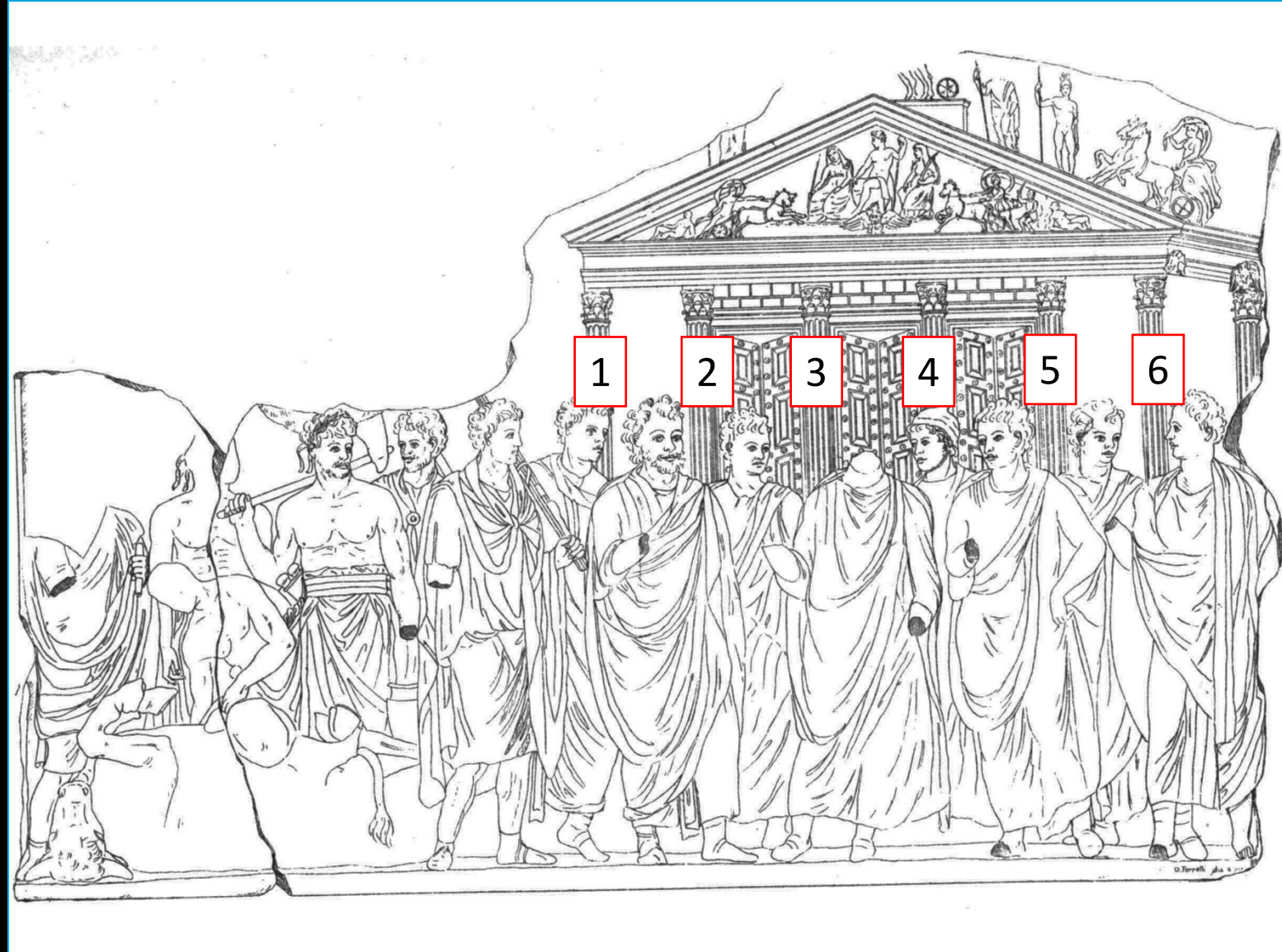


Marcus Aurelius Sacrifice Panel
(Ryberg 1967: fig. 14a)



Reconstruction of Extispicium Relief
(Wace 1907: pl. XXIX)

Ancient Depictions of Capitoline Temple



Marcus Aurelius Sacrifice Panel
(Ryberg 1967: fig. 14a)

Reconstruction of Extispicium Relief
(Wace 1907: pl. XXIX)

Octastyle Temple

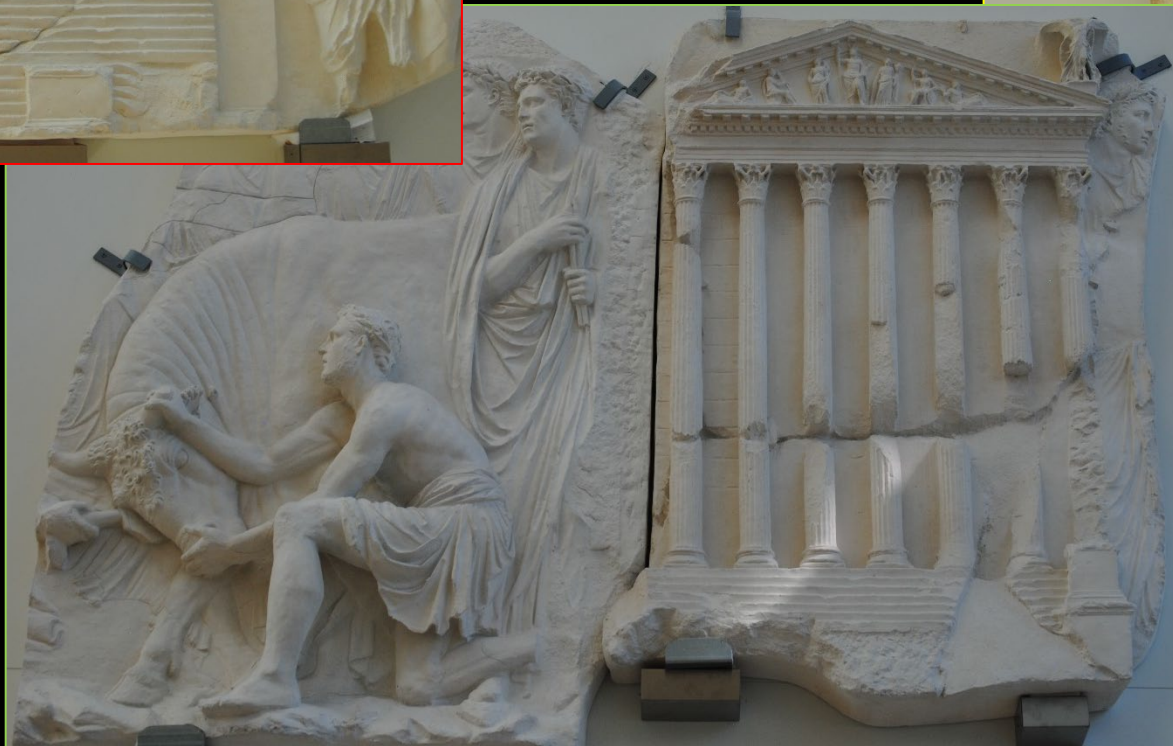


Hexastyle Temple



Octastyle Temple







Since the city was not adorned as the dignity of the empire demanded, and was exposed to flood and fire, he so beautified it that he could justly boast that he had found it built of brick and left it in marble.

Suetonius Aug. 28

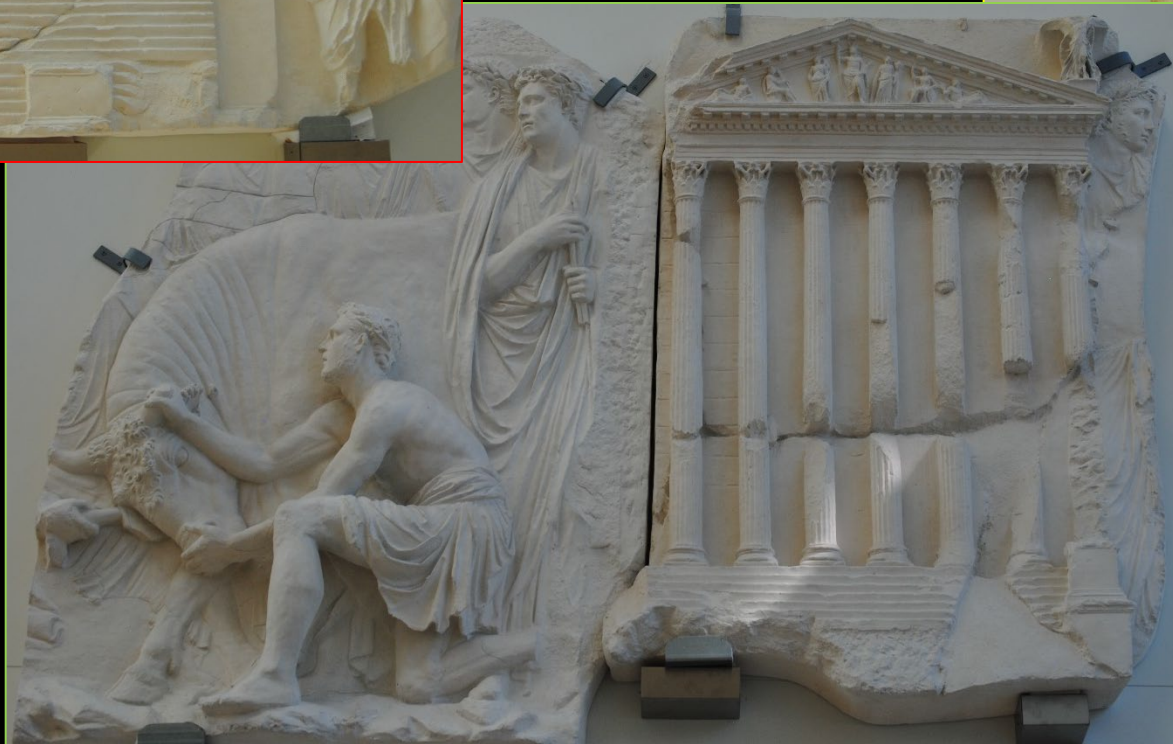
Octastyle Temple

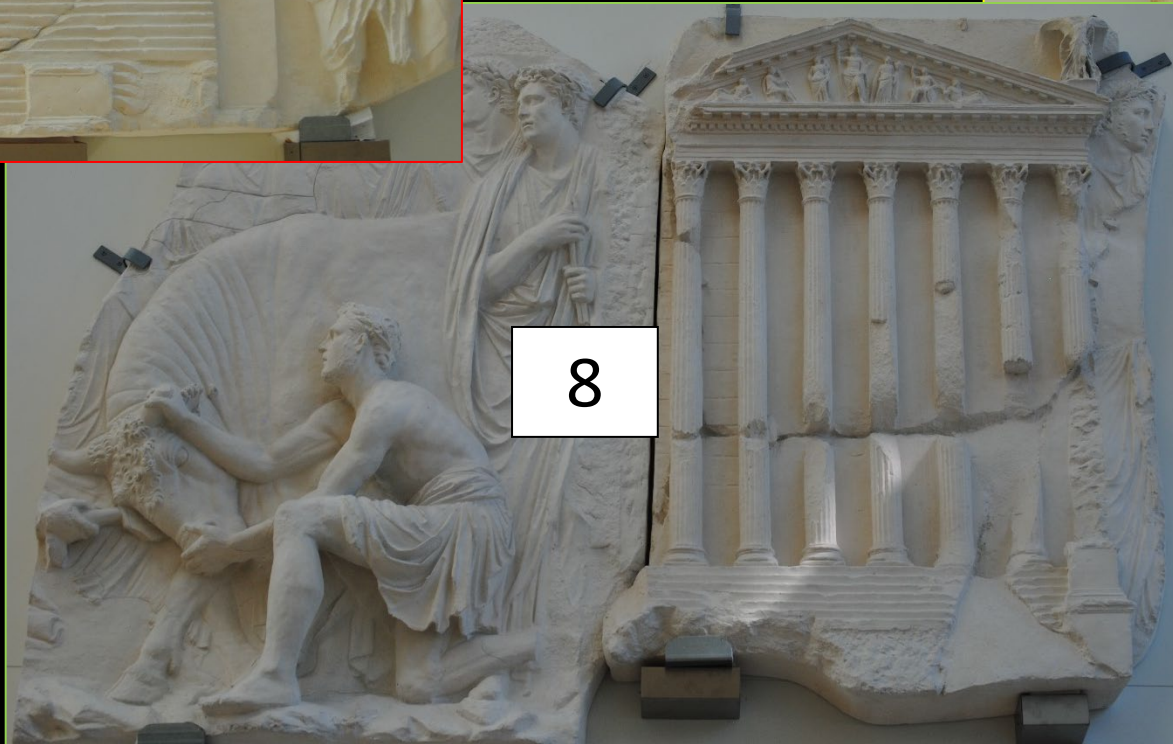


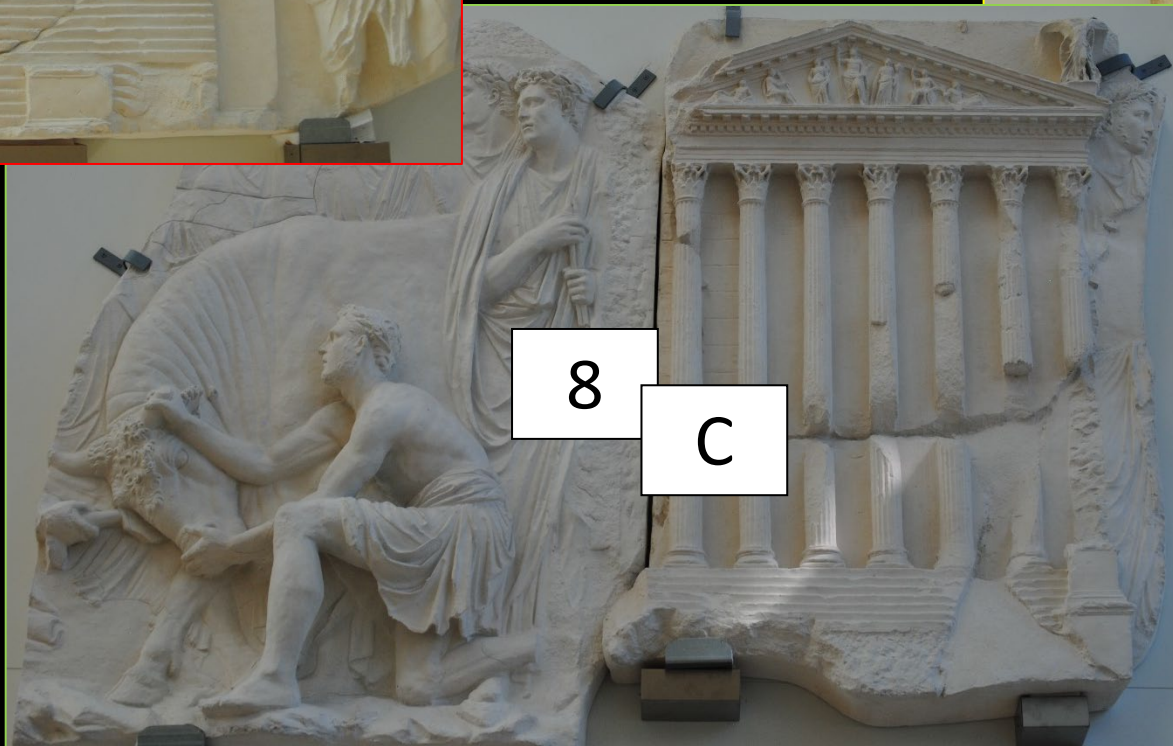
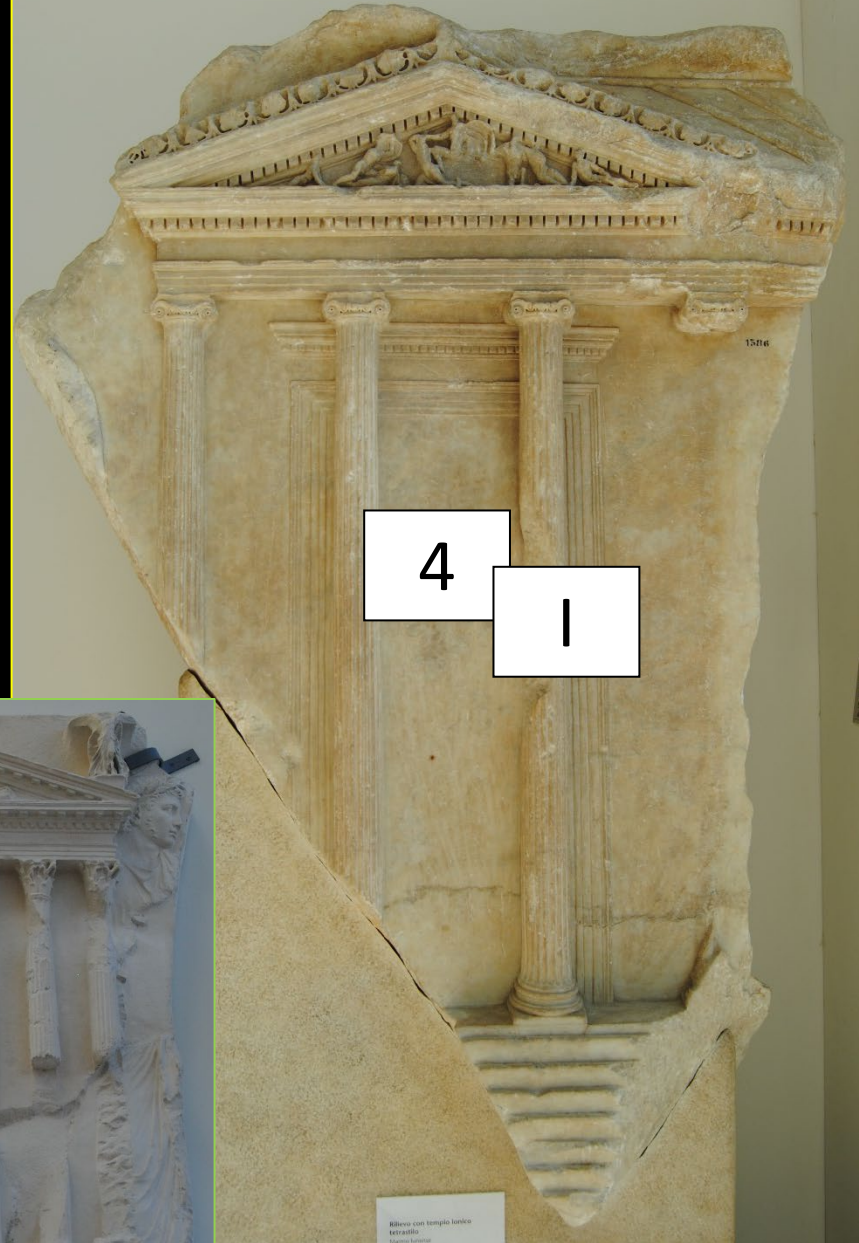
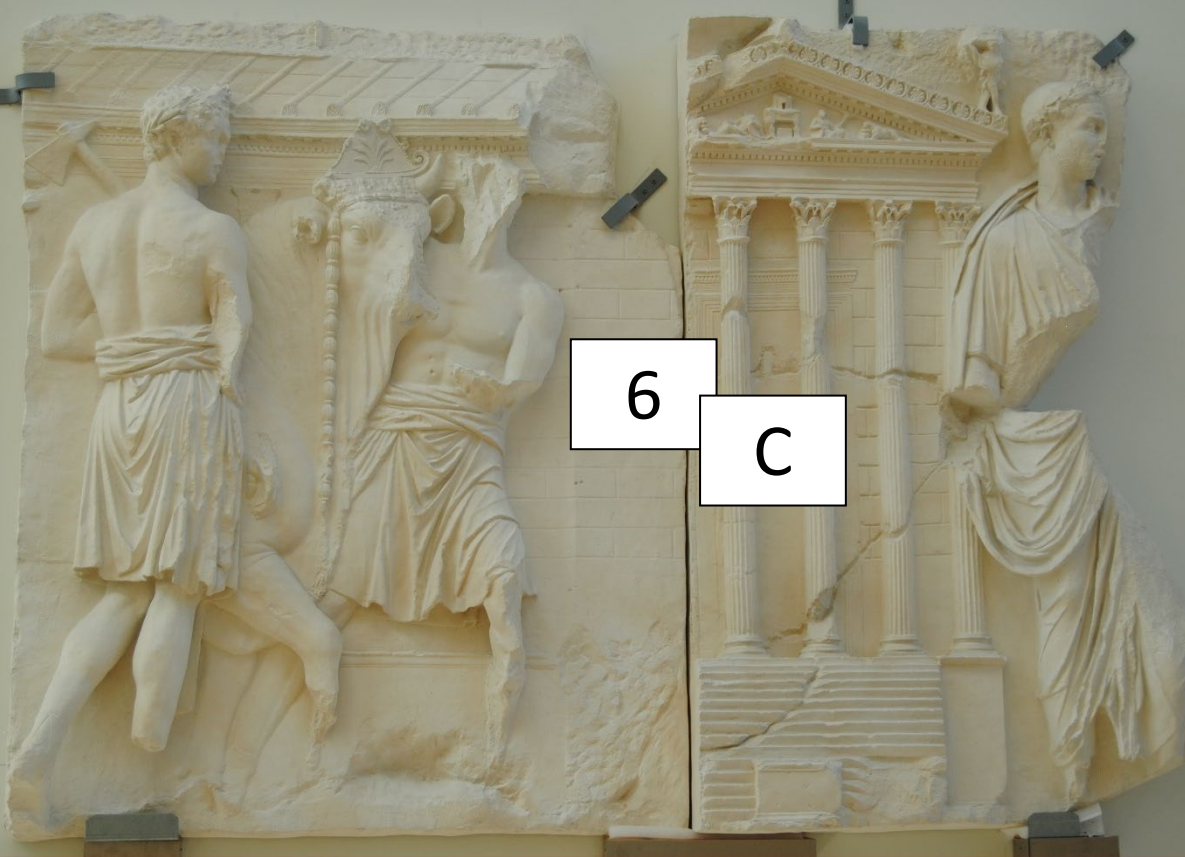
Tetrastyle Temple



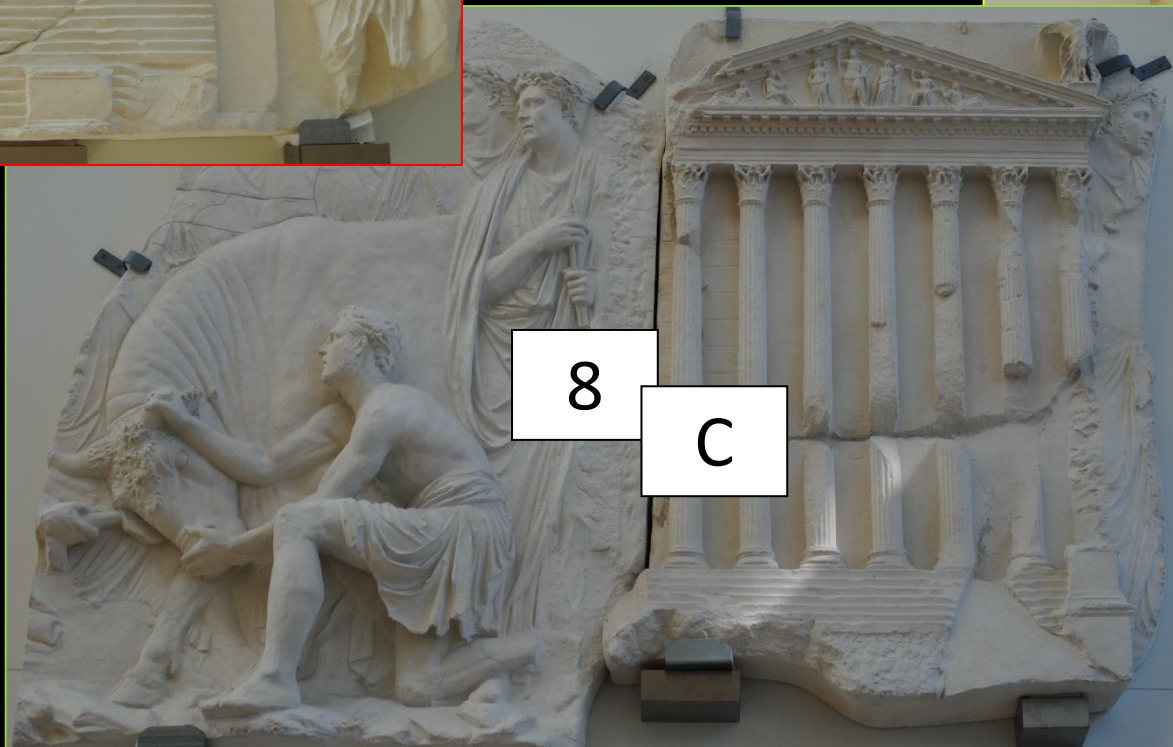
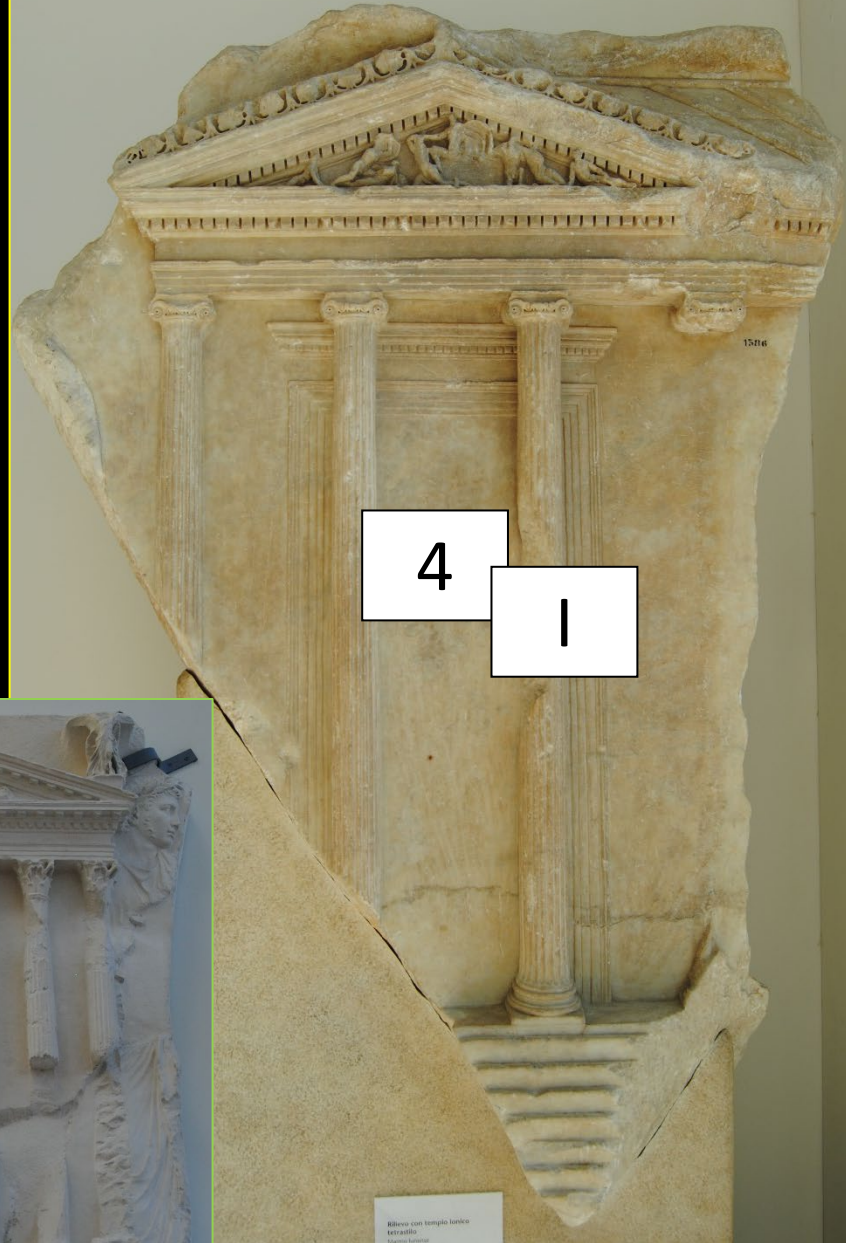
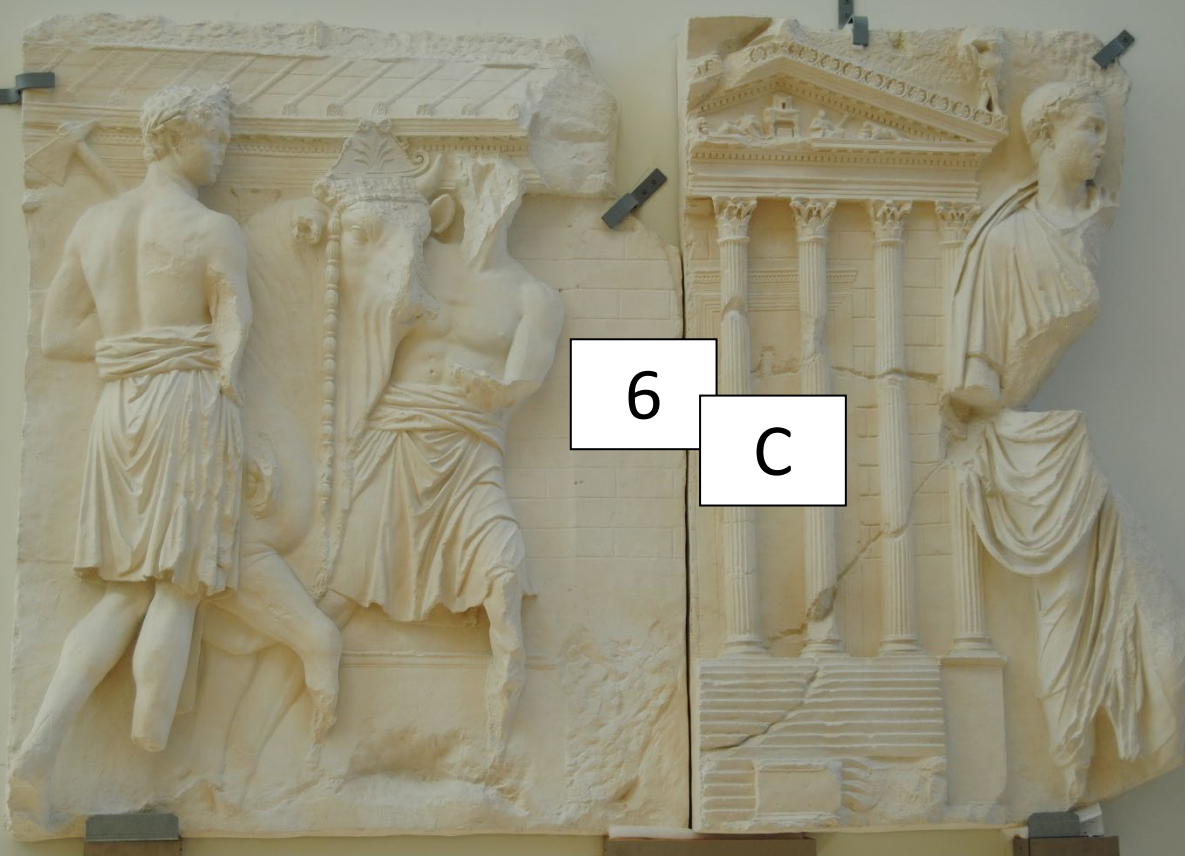
Hexastyle Temple





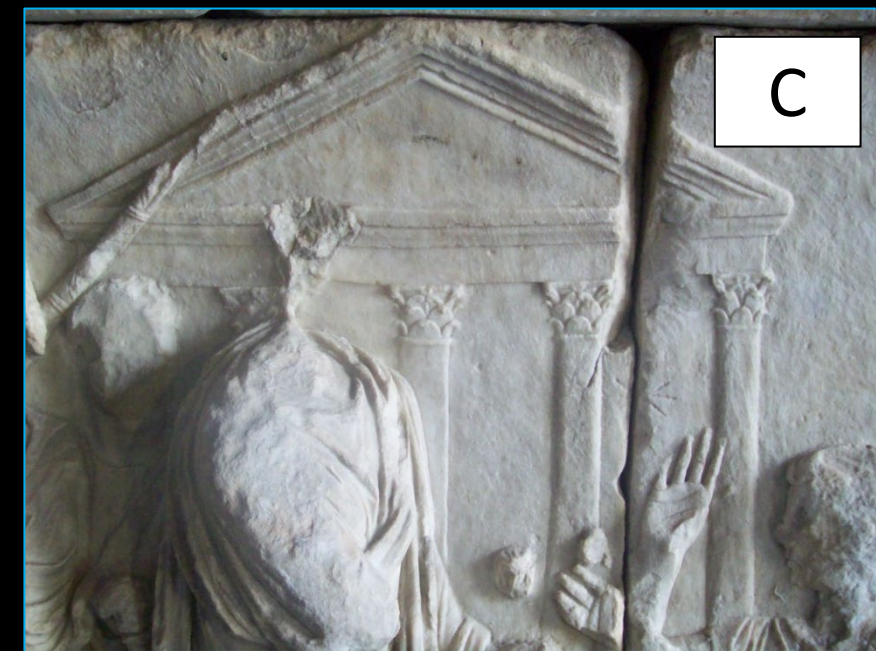








Temples on the Anaglypha Reliefs (Rome)



Octastyle Temple



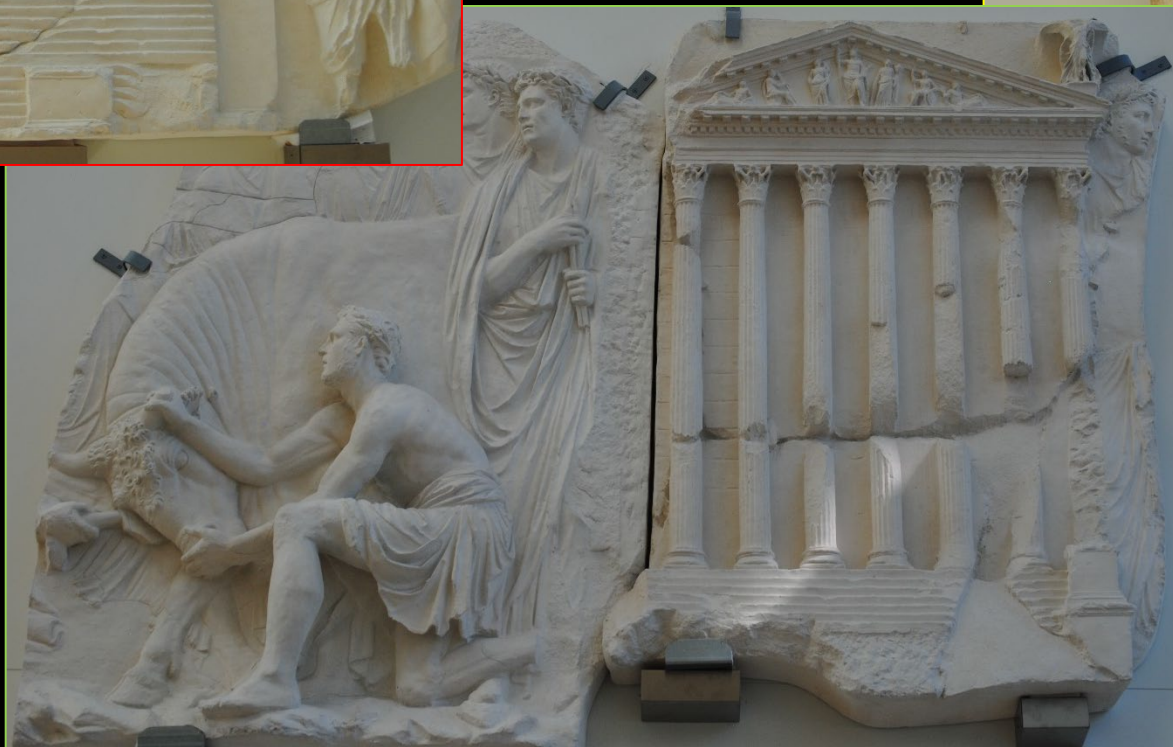
Tetrastyle Temple

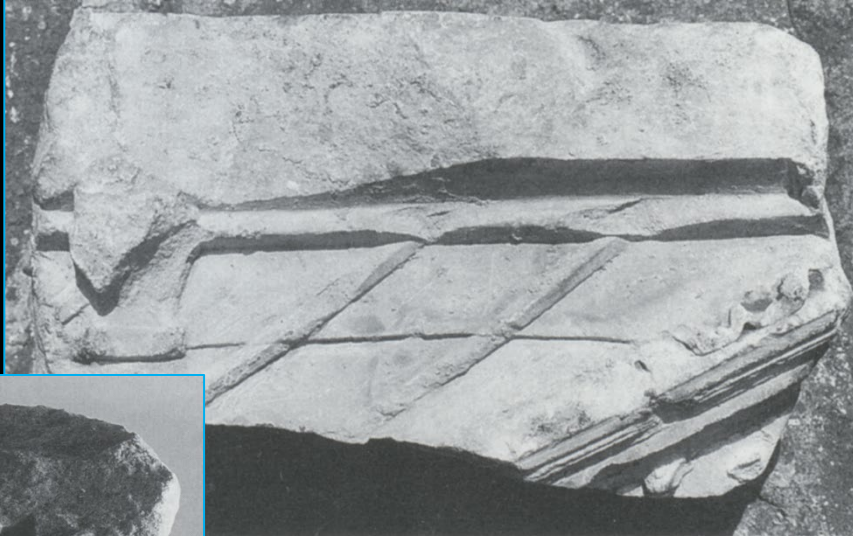
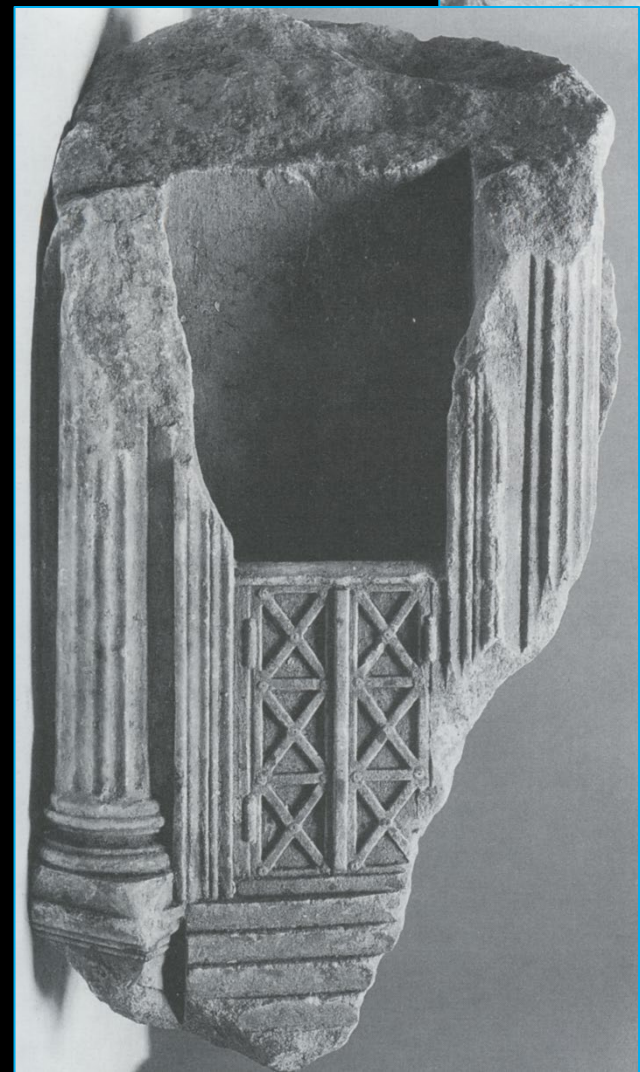


Hexastyle Temple

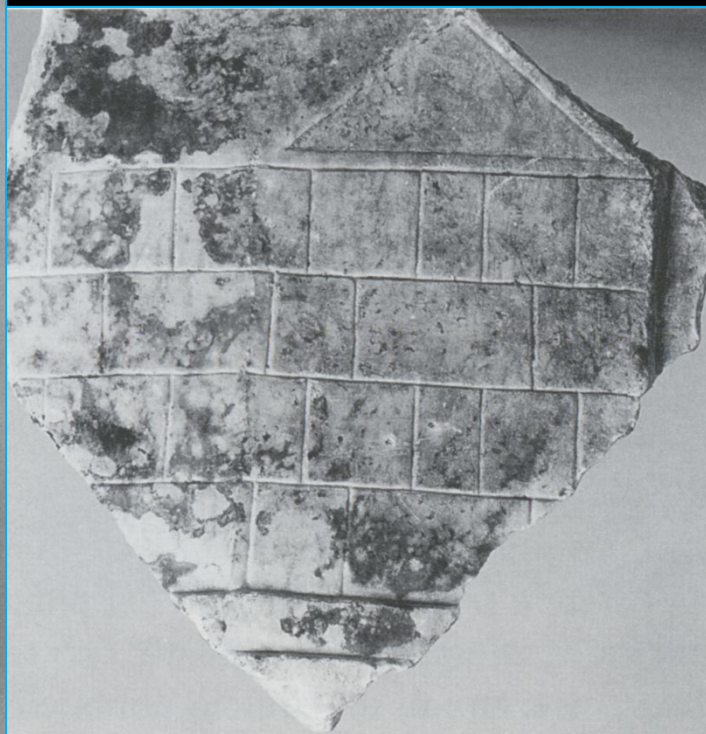


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Fragments associated with Valle-Medici altar (La Rocca 1994)





Fragment of
Circular Temple Colonnade
(M.C. 3345, published as
La Rocca 1994, no. 1 fig. 19)

H = 46 cm



Octastyle temple

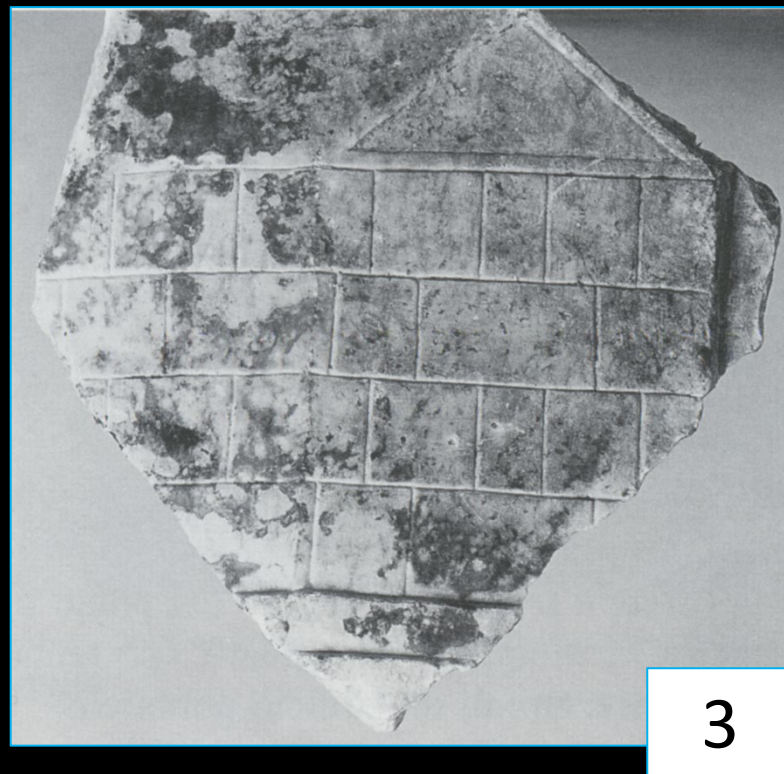
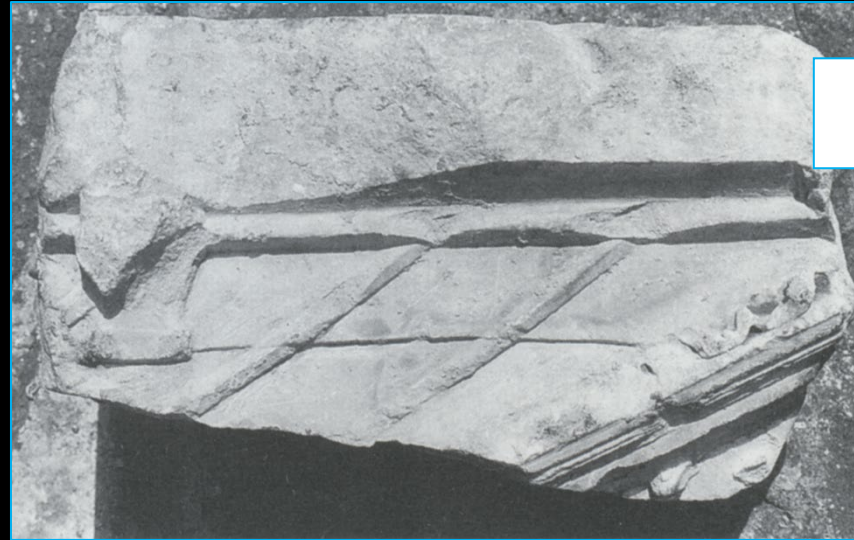
H = 155 cm

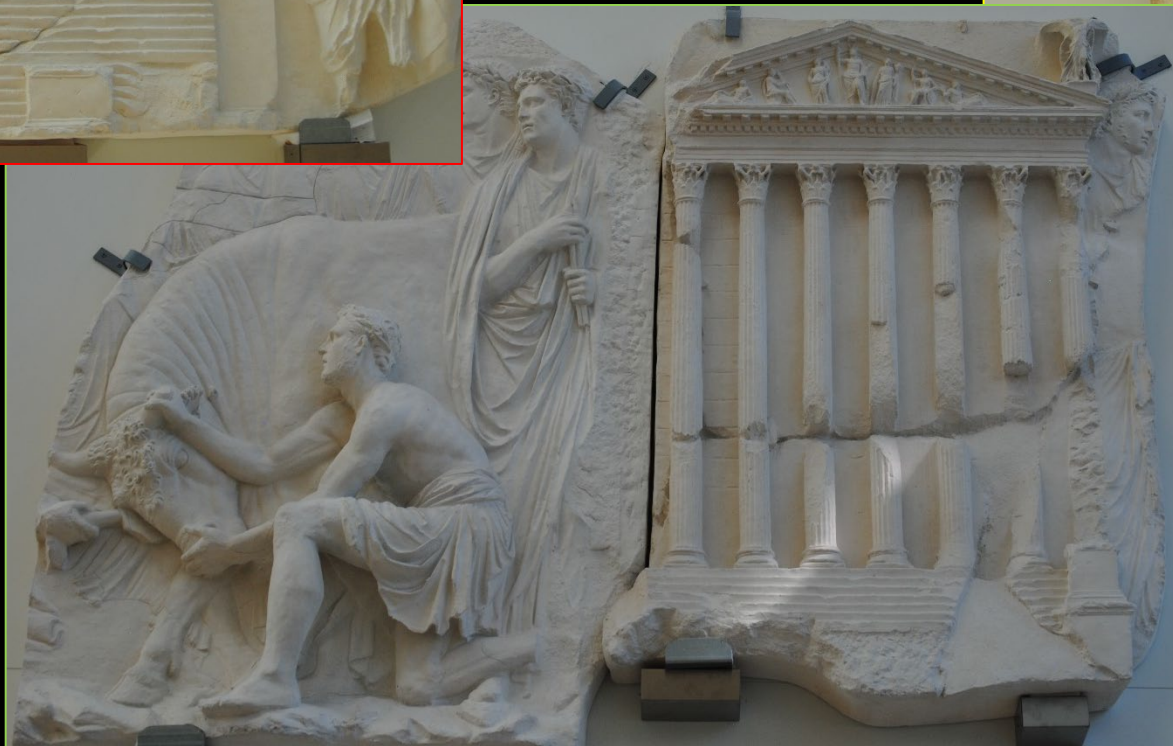


Fragment of
Circular Temple Roof
(M.C. 3346, published as
La Rocca 1994, no. 1 fig. 18)









The Temples of the Valle-Medici
Reliefs: Context



ANS 2002.46.487

Porticus or Basilica Aemilia

Numismatic series celebrating
M. Aemilius Lepidus' ancestor
(58 CE)

RRC 419/1d
ANS 1937.158.192

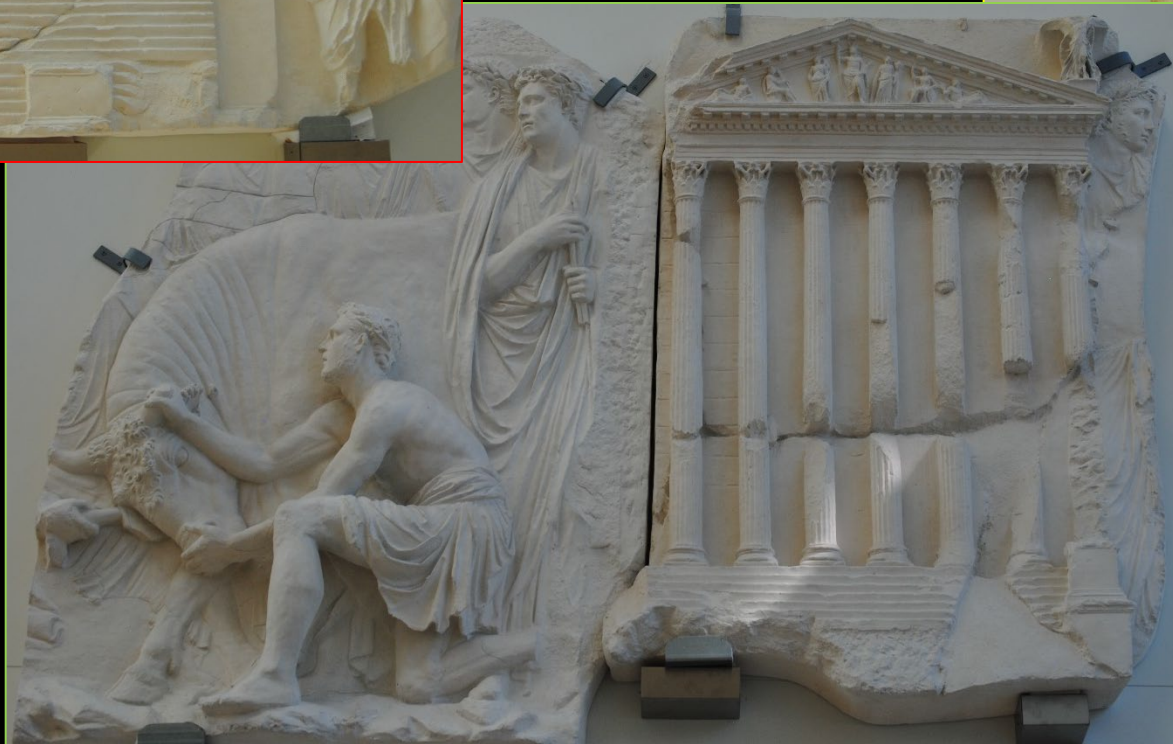


Statue for bravery in battle

RRC 419/2
ANS 1905.57.23



Guardianship of
Ptolemy V



The Valle-Medici Reliefs and the Visualization of Rome

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